

Not Just Any Body
Luke 24:26-48
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What did you do Easter evening? I know what most of you were doing Easter morning; you were right here, singing “Christ the Lord Has Risen Today” with your church family. But what did you do Easter evening? My family and I went to a friend’s house for dinner, and enjoyed a nice, relaxing evening after a busy but meaningful week. Steaks were grilled, drink was poured, and laughter was shared. It was, as it should be, an evening of joy, and we didn’t even have to do the dishes afterward.

It’s only appropriate that our Easter ended with a glorious meal, because eating seems to be a common thread running through Jesus’ ministry. In the 24 chapters of his gospel, Luke records 10 meals that Jesus shares with people. The meal we just read about is one of them, and is preceded by the meal he shared with the travelers on the road to Emmaus, where the risen Christ is made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

For the disciples, however, today’s meal is not a casual, celebratory Easter dinner. For all they know, it could be their last supper together. This story from Luke occurs on Easter evening, later in the day after the empty tomb was discovered. I don’t know if we can even imagine what the disciples were going through emotionally. Twenty-four hours earlier, Jesus was dead, and rumor had it that pictures of his followers were appearing on “Wanted” posters in post offices all across Jerusalem.

Then, this morning, they’d heard reports about Jesus’ resurrection. Really? Can that be true? Do they dare believe it? The disciples are astounded and confused and elated and not quite convinced, like the person holding a winning lottery ticket, just waiting for their friend to jump out of the closet and say, “April Fools!”

As they debate Jesus’ whereabouts, they suddenly realize he is standing in their living room. Just a minute ago they had been wrestling with the fact that Jesus’ body was missing, and suddenly the missing body is standing among them, breathing and talking and offering peace and ordering the fish fillet.

This is no prank. What took place in that room on Easter night was no spooky séance during which time the Ghost of Jesus Past was somehow conjured up. This wasn’t some group hallucination. It wasn’t some symbolic way of speaking of the way in which Jesus “lived on in their hearts.” Jesus is alive – a risen, living, loving Jesus who comes to make even a simple fish dinner into a spiritual event.

The point Luke is making here is that what the disciples see is nothing less than Jesus in bodily form. They had not even begun to consider, if Jesus was really alive, what his body would look like. And then they see him, they see his hands and feet, they see him eat a piece of fish, they see that he is real, and that realness helps them understand the meaning of the resurrection.

The idea of a bodily resurrection was a difficult concept for Jesus’ followers to comprehend. The Jewish faith didn’t have any belief in the resurrection of the body. Only a few decades after the resurrection, the church in Corinth was becoming divided over this issue. Other groups were popping up, like the Gnostics, who believed that the flesh

and the spirit would be separated at death and stay separated for eternity, which means the body would stay in the ground, no get up and move around.

In I Corinthians 15, Paul addresses this by saying, “But someone may ask, ‘How are the dead raised? And with what body will they come?’” Using an agricultural metaphor, he goes on to say, “when you sow, you do not plant the body that will be, but just a seed. What is sown is a natural body, what is raised is a spiritual body.”

To me, that says that these bodies we now inhabit aren’t ours for eternity. Can I get an “Amen!” to that good news? A man was standing in front of a mirror, and he complained to his wife, “Honey, my body’s going to rot. My knees ache, my skin is all wrinkly, my back hurts, I’ve got liver spots, I’m losing hair where I want it and growing hair where I don’t want it. Say something to cheer me up.” The wife looked over the top of her book at her husband, gave him the once-over, and said, “Well, there’s nothing wrong with your eyesight.”

Paul says that what we have now is not what we’ll have later. While there’s a lot of humor to be had there, there’s a deeper point of joy, as well. That says to me that those who have cancer now won’t have cancer in Heaven. Those who have an illness now, that illness gets left behind. Those who have been disfigured or crippled or made to feel less than fully human, when they get to Heaven, they will exist in all the glory God created them to be. Stacey won’t have breast cancer, Brayden won’t have Cystic Fibrosis, I won’t have Multiple Sclerosis, Emma doesn’t have Down’s Syndrome. What is planted is that natural body, with all its nearsightedness and tooth decay and arthritis; what is raised is a spiritual body, as God created us to be.

That’s what the disciples saw on Easter evening. They saw Jesus in the body, but not the same body they had seen before. This was not a resuscitated corpse. What the disciples saw was somehow the same, but somehow different. But the important thing, the essential thing for me is this: they recognized him. When they looked at him, when they truly opened their eyes to see him, they recognized him. If God raised up Jesus from the dead in a way that his beloved friends recognized him, there is assurance that will God raise up us and our loved ones in a way that we will recognize each other.

I remember standing at my grandfather’s casket in 1997 and hearing people around me say, “They did such a good job! It looks just like him.” And I wanted to say, “No it doesn’t look like him, because he would never go this long without smiling or laughing or telling a joke.” At the funeral of my other grandfather a few years ago, the minister encouraged us all to close our eyes and remember him at his best moments, fully alive, when he wasn’t nearly deaf and blind and hunched over. That image I have of him is what I expect to see when I get to Heaven. He won’t be quite the same, but he won’t be completely different either.

It is that hope, that expectation, to which Jesus’ appearance to the disciples testifies, and it is that appearance that gives credence to the words Jesus shares with them. After eating the fish, he tells them that his resurrection is a fulfillment of all the Old Testament prophecy about the coming of the Messiah, and that from now on repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in Jesus’ name to all nations. In other words, God has done what God said he was going to do. Now it’s our turn to do what we said we were going to do when we made our confession of faith.

Our charge, as given by Jesus to the disciples, is simply this: You are witnesses of these things. We are called to be witnesses, to testify to the work of God in this world.

You may wonder how we can witness to something we haven't seen. In Bible Study on Tuesday, we talked about the story of Thomas on which Tim preached last week. Jesus says in that story, "Blessed are those who haven't seen and still believe." How can we believe if we haven't seen? How can we testify to something we didn't personally witness?

Because someone did witness it. Once there existed a flesh-and-blood group of people who said, "We saw him. We saw his hands and feet. We saw him eat. We heard his offer of peace." And those people told others, who told others, who wrote it down, who passed it on, and now we hold it in our hands and our hearts. We stand on the shoulders of the disciples, who saw with their own eyes what we know in our hearts to be true.

But it's not completely accurate for us to say we haven't witnessed the presence of the living Christ, because we have. We haven't heard him say, "Peace be with you," but we've seen the power of his reconciling love and his ability to help heal divisions. Although he may not appear in our midst and eat broiled fish, his presence is tangible in soup kitchens, around the kitchen table, and around the communion table.

We have witnessed Christ in our midst. Father Hugh Burns says, "The place to look for Jesus is in our need. Look for him in our pain. Look for him in the boredom. We will find him right in the middle of our sickness, nestled in the darkness of our depression, in the loneliness and anger of a divorce or a child gone astray. It is only in our weakness that we will ever know the power of Jesus' resurrection. It is only in the ordinary moments of life that we can experience an extraordinary lift that his risen life can give us." And when we do, we are witnesses, call to share the good news of repentance and forgiveness with all the nations.

Remember the line from our scripture today? "And while they still did not believe it because of joy and amazement, he asked them, 'Do you have anything here to eat?'" In the midst of our joy and amazement this morning, I see a table set with bread and cup. Perhaps we could share this meal together, knowing that as we do, we will once again witness the risen Christ in our presence.